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# Methods And Techniques For Studying The History Of Sociology In America

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# METHODS AND TECHNIQUES FOR STUDYING THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

**Michael R. Hill, Editor**

*Sociological Origins*  
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USA

Professore Rauty, Colleghi, membri del Seminario, Signore e Signori:

E' un grande privilegio parlare con voi oggi nel vostro bel paese dei metodi di ricerca per lo studio e la documentazione della storia della sociologia.<sup>2</sup> La storia disciplinare e' importante per me. L'anno scorso ho concluso il mio incarico a capo della Sezione sulla Storia della Sociologia nell'Associazione di Sociologia Americana, quindi so bene che la storia e' importante anche per molti dei miei colleghi. Nel 2005, l'Associazione Americana di Sociologia festeggerà il suo centenario: di conseguenza, sempre più sociologi americani cominciano a porsi questioni storiche riguardo alla disciplina della sociologia. Nel presentare queste osservazioni, spero di attirare l'attenzione sugli specifici aspetti metodologici della scrittura e della ricerca della storia disciplinare in America. Consentitemi di dire che mi dispiace moltissimo di non poter parlare con voi in Italiano oggi visto che la mia conoscenza della lingua e' nulla. Perciò, il resto della mia presentazione sarà in inglese.

## **A Fundamental Problem**

Let me begin with a *fundamental* problem: How is it *possible* for scholars to know, discover, and document the structure, patterns, history, and accomplishments of academic and scientific disciplines? This is a complex and difficult intellectual and methodological problem. This is a problem requiring patience, reflexivity, critique, and much hard work. It is a problem addressed by sociological specialists in the fields of "sociology of knowledge" and "sociology of science." It is also a problem with which all sociologists must be concerned. The methods and presuppositions that we use to discover disciplinary history necessarily shape our "findings" in a variety of ways. The problematic nature of this situation is greatly exacerbated when scholars in one country attempt to learn the disciplinary history of scholars who live and write in other countries. My understanding of sociology in Italy, for example, is limited largely to passing familiarity with the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, Vilfredo Pareto, and Cesare Lombroso. Of course, as I hope you will cordially instruct me after the seminar, there is much much more to learn about Italian sociology. But for now, let me reverse the situation and pose the question this way: How can scholars in Italy, like yourselves, proceed methodologically to understand and learn about the robust and many-faceted history of

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<sup>1</sup> Presented November 19, 2003, to the Second Meeting on the History of Sociology, Dipartimento de Sociologia e Scienza della Politica, Università degli Studi de Salerno (Fisciano, Italy). Co-sponsored by the United States Consulate (Naples).

<sup>2</sup> Translation of this section prepared by Ms. Marcis Caporale of Lincoln, Nebraska, USA.

American sociology? The examples I use here are drawn from the United States, but similar procedures apply, more or less, to other English-speaking countries.<sup>3</sup>

A traditional and seemingly reasonable response is to “go to the library” to read the relevant scholarly books on the subject of American sociology. Unfortunately, there are many difficulties here. For example, the books available to you are *pre-selected* in various ways:

- (1) Of the many books that are written or proposed, only a relatively few are actually published,
- (2) of the books that are published, only a relatively few are purchased and made available in university libraries (especially in the case of books published in other countries), and
- (3) for those books that do get published and are available in libraries, we are held hostage to the biases of each published author.

The problem of bias in disciplinary history is very severe. It is important to realize:

- (1) Publishers typically publish mainly those books for which they anticipate good sales, and
- (2) many factors are typically *believed* by publishers to increase sales, including:
  - (a) the fame or prestige of the author, and
  - (b) the fame or prestige of the subject(s) of the book.

The result, sadly for the *overall* history of sociology, is that most books on this topic are written by well-known, well-established authors in prestigious schools who write about the sociologists whom *they* consider to be the most important and the most significant. The consequence, over the past 100 years, is both circular and cumulative. In sociology generally, for example, there are *hundreds* of scholarly books on the work of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. In the United States, there are *hundreds* of books and articles about sociology and sociologists at the University of Chicago (to which my colleagues, Professor Rauty and Professor Deegan have added their own distinguished contributions).<sup>4</sup> This is a general human process, as your well-known countrymen, Pliny the Younger,<sup>5</sup> wrote, nearly two thousand years ago:

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<sup>3</sup> For example, my own research on the English sociologist, Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), has been conducted largely from afar – from within the United States.

<sup>4</sup> See, for examples, Lester R. Kurtz, *Evaluating Chicago Sociology: A Guide to the Literature, with an Annotated Bibliography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Nels Anderson, *On Hobos and Homelessness*, edited by Raffaele Rauty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918* (New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1988); and Mary Jo Deegan, *Race, Hull-House, and the University of Chicago* (Westport: Pareger, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (62 A.D.- ?).

How much does the fame of human actions depend upon the station of those who perform them! The very same conduct shall be either applauded to the skies or entirely overlooked, just as it may happen to proceed from a person of conspicuous or obscure rank.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the published books on the history of sociology in the United States typically tell only the stories that privileged academics in elite schools want to tell.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, these are interesting and valuable stories, but they are neither representative nor comprehensive narratives.

### Three Alternative Strategies for Reading the History of Sociology

Methodologically, we are stuck in a difficult place if we want to read more representative and comprehensive accounts of the disciplinary history of sociology in America. How can we read more broadly? For starters, we can apply three provisional strategies for selecting historical materials to read:

- (1) We can *purposefully* choose to read the work of relatively unknown authors who write about relatively unknown sociologists. For example, suppose we each compile a long list of books published about the history of sociology, and then select from that list a book about otherwise unknown sociologists that was published by the *least* prestigious press! This seems counterintuitive at first glance. Indeed, we may discover that the book selected isn't a very good book, or is badly written. On the other hand, many of these overlooked works provide delightful and intellectually provocative reading. And, if we read several such books, there is a good chance that we will at least be *introduced* to any number of unheralded sociologists who have led interesting and instructive sociological lives. Having been introduced to an *alternative* list of sociological actors, we are better positioned to construct more representative accounts of disciplinary history.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Letter LXVII (To Macer), in *Letters of Pliny*, translated by William Melmoth, revised by F.C.T. Bosanquet, *The Harvard Classics*, Vol. 9 (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909: 305).

<sup>7</sup> This general problem is compounded by uncritical reliance on introductory textbooks – which Kuhn shows systematically warp the disciplinary history of every discipline. See, Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). For a recent discussion on the evolving relationship between disciplinary history and textbooks in sociology, see Mary Jo Deegan, "Textbooks, the History of Sociology, and the Sociological Stock of Knowledge," *Sociological Theory* 21 (September 2003: 298-305).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Jo Deegan lists several reference sources that provide basic biographical information once you have discovered the name of a little-known sociologist. For details, see "Transcending a Patriarchal Past: Teaching the History of Women in Sociology," *Teaching Sociology* 16 (April, 1988: 141-150). With additional bibliographic research, it then becomes possible to write intellectual sketches of the accomplishments of many such sociologists. See, for numerous examples, Mary Jo Deegan, *Women in Sociology: A Bio-Bibliographic Sourcebook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

- (2) Rather than being narrowly restrictive or inherently elitist, we can purposefully widen our definitions of (a) who, in fact, qualifies to be categorized as a “sociologist” and (b) what types of activity qualify as “sociological.” The Deegan/Käsler criteria,<sup>9</sup> for example, provide a useful model in this regard, an approach that led materially, in Deegan’s case, to the re-discovery of Jane Addams as a sociologist clearly engaged in sociological activities.
- (3) Rather than reading *accounts of* early disciplinary history, we can purposefully turn instead to the actual works produced by early sociologists. It is surprising how refreshing, lively, and substantial these early works can sometimes be. We can purposefully compile a comprehensive list, for example, of the early members of the American Sociological Society, and then search for the books and articles they wrote. Many of these works remain available for purchase via used book dealers.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the early issues of the *American Journal of Sociology* (as well as dozens of other journals in the humanities and social sciences) can be searched (and downloaded) on-line via JSTOR in many university libraries – and if JSTOR is not available locally, one can subscribe to it for only \$40 per year once one has joined the American Sociological Association. For my own research, I have begun searching JSTOR for articles by obscure sociologists, downloading their journal articles as pdf files, and organizing these files to build my own digital library for future reading. I should add that there are also many interesting and useful early journals and magazines that are not available via JSTOR,<sup>11</sup> but JSTOR provides a place to begin your search. Further, to locate journal articles published in obscure journals since the 1960s, written by unrecognized scholars about largely unknown sociologists, the expensive, on-line version of *Sociological Abstracts* is an valuable resource.<sup>12</sup>

These three strategies: (1) purposefully turning to obscure writers, (2) purposefully adopting inclusive rather than exclusionary definitions of sociology and sociologists, and (3) purposefully reading original works themselves rather than *accounts of* those writings, can help lead you,

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<sup>9</sup> See Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School*, p. 9. These criteria are: (1) occupies a chair of sociology and/or teaches sociology, (2) membership in a national sociological society, (3) authorship of sociological articles or textbooks, (4) self-definition as a sociologist, or (5) definition by others as a sociologist. Dirk Käsler defined as a sociologist anyone who met just *one* of these criteria. Deegan shows that Jane Addams meets *all* five!

<sup>10</sup> For books published in the US and England (and, increasingly, for other countries as well), the Advanced Book Exchange is currently the best on-line source of used academic books. You can find it on the Web at [www.abe.com](http://www.abe.com) where you can easily search the offerings of thousands of book dealers. Many titles are quite expensive, but many others can be had at modest cost.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Sociological Papers* (published by the London Sociological Society in the early 1900s), *Bibliotheca Sacra* (for early writings by Christian sociologists in the United States), etc., etc.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the articles published in *Sociological Origins* are fully indexed in *Sociological Abstracts*.

eventually, to a more representative understanding of the disciplinary history of sociology, not only in the United States but also and elsewhere.

In recent years, a few American scholars – and it is at present only a few – are trying to write more comprehensive and inclusive accounts of the disciplinary history of American sociology. This group includes not only Mary Jo Deegan but also several other members of the newly organized ASA Section on the History of Sociology, specifically: Anthony Blasi, Linda Rynbrandt, Lynn McDonald, Mike Keen, Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, Barry Johnston, Connie Frey, Patricia Lengermann, Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, and the late Helena Znaniecka Lopata, among others. The substantive results of this “new history” in American sociology provide important alternative models of disciplinary activity and scholarly behavior.<sup>13</sup> In his recent presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Joe R. Feagin specifically commended and encouraged the efforts of these scholars in bringing the previously neglected work of Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Martineau, and others, to our collective sociological attention.<sup>14</sup> This new work has been accomplished not by following the well worn path, but by looking into dimly-lit corners, by being inclusive, and by widely reading original sources in libraries and archives.<sup>15</sup>

### Existential Serendipity

As an “appendix” to this discussion, allow me to add a note concerning what might best be termed the “existential serendipity” of several of the new disciplinary histories now being written by scholars in the United States. The strategies I have listed provide only part of the answer to the question: “But how did you discover sociologist “X” in the first place?” “Why did you think that someone like Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or Harriet Martineau might be important sociologists, even though few people, if any, ever wrote about their sociological accomplishments?” Part of the answer rests simply in “being in the right place at the right time.” The late American sociologist Erving Goffman would have defined such situations as a variety of “fortuitousness,”<sup>16</sup> and Mary Jo Deegan has described similar events as “archival surprises.”<sup>17</sup> It is usually the case that

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, my essay on “Martineauian Sociology and Our Disciplinary Future,” *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical & Methodological Perspectives*, edited by Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale (New York: Routledge, 2001: 191-193).

<sup>14</sup> Joe R. Feagin, “Social Justice and Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty-First Century,” *American Sociological Review* 66 (February, 2001: 1-20).

<sup>15</sup> Learning how to discover and follow clues to sociological history in archives is important, but lies beyond the scope of the present essay. For details, see Michael R. Hill, *Archival Strategies and Techniques* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974: 33-35).

<sup>17</sup> Mary Jo Deegan, “‘Dear Love, Dear Love’: Feminist Pragmatism and the Chicago Female World of Love and Ritual,” *Gender & Society* 10 (October, 1996: 590-607).

each scholar who writes about previously obscure sociologists has had a unique experience that brings that previously unknown sociologist to their attention. In Mary Jo Deegan's case, for example, she found herself, as a student, at a time when American women were asking feminist questions generally, in a section of the enormous Regenstein library at the University of Chicago face-to-face with hundreds of sociological books written by women that she had never heard mentioned in her courses. "Who are these women?" she asked herself, and thus, at that moment, started what became a career of documenting the work of previously unknown women sociologists, including Jane Addams. It was a moment of existential serendipity.

In the case of Mike Keen, who has studied the way in which the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) conducted secret surveillance on American sociologists, Mike was researching the history and activities of his grandfather, who was an academic but was *not* a sociologist. As part of that research, Mike learned how to obtain a copy of his grandfather's confidential FBI file by using the provisions of the new U.S. Freedom of Information Act. It was while looking at his grandfather's official file that Mike had a sudden inspiration: "If the FBI kept files on my grandfather, perhaps they kept files on sociologists too." And thus, at that moment, Mike started what became a massive and original research project: compiling lists of names of sociologists and then formally requesting all relevant files that the FBI might have. In this way, Mike learned much about the history of American sociology that could be learned in no other way.<sup>18</sup>

I will conclude with two stories related to my own research. First, how did I come to "discover" and then re-publish Harriet Martineau's *How To Observe Morals and Manners*, the earliest research methods text in sociology?<sup>19</sup> It was an exemplar of existential serendipity. First, in my earlier studies as a geographer,<sup>20</sup> I became deeply interested in research methods, *per se*. Next, I was a student in a research methods course in sociology in which the instructor assigned a reading by the Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who made social observations in the United States in the early 1800s. Next, I mentioned this assignment to Professor Deegan, who exploded: "De Tocqueville! Why aren't you reading Martineau?" It turns out that Martineau also made better and more detailed observations in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, our library did *not* have a complete copy of Martineau's American studies. All that was available was an *abridgement* published in 1962 by Seymour Martin Lipset. In his introduction to the abridgement, Lipset referenced *How to Observe Morals and Maners*. Our library in Nebraska did not have a copy. Indeed, very few libraries had copies, but I eventually obtained a copy via interlibrary loan. I was amazed! It was a wonderful

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<sup>18</sup> Mike Forrest Keen, *Stalking the Sociological Imagination: J. Edgar Hoover's FBI Surveillance of American Sociology* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Harriet Martineau, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (London: Charles Knight, 1838).

<sup>20</sup> Michael R. Hill, *Spatial Structure and Decision-Making Aspects of Pedestrian Route Selection through an Urban Environment*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Michael R. Hill, "A Methodological Comparison of Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1837) and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835-1840)," *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical & Methodological Perspectives*, edited by Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale (New York: Routledge, 2003: 59-74).



book filled with creative and logically rigorous methodological advice, and thus, at that point, began my effort to get it republished.<sup>22</sup> I was in the right place at the right time, and it opened my long-term interest in Martineau.

It was also about this time that I became interested in Roscoe Pound, the former Dean of the Harvard Law School and the founder of the American school of sociological jurisprudence who was for twenty-five years an active and influential member of the American Sociological Society. I was sitting in a seminar on the history of sociology, conducted by Professor Deegan, when one of the participants happened, entirely by chance, to mention the name of Roscoe Pound (primarily because Pound was originally from Nebraska). As luck, or fortuitousness, or existential serendipity would have it, I was at the university library the next day making photocopies of some unrelated materials. My eyes wandered over the titles of the books that a previous user left stacked near the photocopy machine. To fully appreciate this moment, you must remember that I had recently completed a Ph.D. in geography and was only starting my work in sociology. As my eyes wandered casually over the book titles, I was electrified when I saw an old book titled simply: *The Phytogeography of Nebraska* (the plant geography of Nebraska), *by someone named Roscoe Pound*.<sup>23</sup> Could this *possibly* be the *same* Roscoe Pound who became a famous Harvard lawyer? At that moment began my research and I discovered that Pound was not only a lawyer, he was also an important botanist – the founder of the American school of plant ecology – *and* a full-fledged sociologist as well. Had I not been a trained geographer, had I not gone to the library to make photocopies when I did, and had I not attended Professor Deegan's seminar when a fellow student made a casual reference to Roscoe Pound, I would never have discovered Pound's sociological accomplishments.<sup>24</sup> This was indeed an instance of existential serendipity.

## Conclusion

I encourage you to read widely in the history of sociology, to abandon elitist preconceptions, to remain open to new visions and new models of sociological practice. In some cases, no doubt, such a program results in dead ends, but it can also result in amazing discoveries. Be patient, be creative, be adventurous. Learn to appreciate and act upon unexpected moments of fortuitousness. I wish for each of you your own happy event, your own moment of existential serendipity while researching and studying the history of sociology.

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<sup>22</sup> Harriet Martineau, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, sesquicentennial edition, with a new introduction by Michael R. Hill (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Roscoe Pound and Frederick E. Clements, *The Phytogeography of Nebraska*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, Botanical Seminar, 1900).

<sup>24</sup> Michael R. Hill, *Roscoe Pound and American Sociology: A Study in Archival Frame Analysis, Sociobiography, and Sociological Jurisprudence*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1989.